

## INTRODUCTION TO BENJAMIN

### 1940 SURVEY OF FRENCH LITERATURE

*Completed in Paris six months before his death, Walter Benjamin's final report to Max Horkheimer on the literary situation in France is published here for the first time in English. It was the third 'literature letter' that Benjamin had drafted for the Institute for Social Research in New York; the earlier two (3 November 1937, 24 January 1939) can be found in the Gesammelte Briefe. Almost twice as long as these, the Survey of 23 March 1940—Hitler's troops would take Holland six weeks later—was composed during the same months as 'On the Concept of History'. Benjamin's personal situation was precarious: his health had not recovered from his internment as an enemy alien in Autumn 1939; back in his tiny Paris apartment, he worked in bed because of the cold.*

Benjamin's 'apologies' to Horkheimer for the difference between this text and his last may refer to the political and intellectual vistas of war-torn Europe it provides, which open out far beyond the pages under review. It contains perhaps his most direct reflections—via Spengler—on the Hitlerite mentality. If the tone recalls the 'almost Chinese' courtesy that Adorno remarked in Benjamin's correspondence, his sensitivity to the Institute's reactions was well grounded. 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' and his great essay on Fuchs had been published in its journal shorn of their Marxian passages; Benjamin had only learnt while in the internment camp that his 'Baudelaire' would finally appear, after the virtual rejection of its first version by Adorno the year before. To comply with Horkheimer's request for a further report, he set aside a planned comparison of Rousseau's Confessions with Gide's Journals ('a historical account of sincerity'), and his Baudelaire: 'closest to my heart, it would be most damaged if I had to stop after starting it again'.

It is not clear why the Institute never sought to publish the 1940 Survey. It was not included in Scholem and Adorno's 1966 collection of Benjamin's Correspondence, nor in the five-volume Selected Writings published in English by Harvard University Press. It first appeared—in its original French—only in 2000, in Volume VI of the Gesammelte Briefe. Yet the text stands as a striking valedictory statement on the themes central to Benjamin's mature work: Paris, now 'fragile' under the threat of war, its clochards signalling the vaster tribe of Europe's dispossessed; the twilight of Surrealism; and the vocation of cultural theory as material social critique.

WALTER BENJAMIN

1940 SURVEY  
OF FRENCH LITERATURE

Paris, 23 March 1940

Dear Monsieur Horkheimer,

IT IS OVER a year since I sent you my last résumé of French literature. Unfortunately it is not in literary novelties that the past season has proved most fertile. The noxious seed that has sprouted here obscures the blossoming plant of belles-lettres with a sinister foliage. But I shall attempt in any case to make you a florilegium of it. And since the presentation that I offered you before did not displease, I would like to apologize in advance for the ways in which the form of the following remarks may differ.

I shall start with *Paris* by Charles Ferdinand Ramuz—the last portrait of the city to appear before the War.<sup>1</sup> This is far from being a success. But the reader will find here certain interesting features, in that they reveal the distance that the portraitist takes from his subject: the city. A distance on three counts. Firstly, Ramuz has hitherto concentrated on tales of peasant life (of which *Derborence* is the most memorable). In addition he is not French but Vaudois, so not just rural but foreign. Finally, his book was written when the threat of war had begun to loom over the city, seeming to lend it a sort of fragility that would prompt a retreat on the part of the portraitist. The book came to prominence through its serialization in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. The author still holds the stage, as he seems to be becoming the NRF's accredited chronicler of the War. The March issue opens with his 'Pages from a Neutral', presented as the start of a long series of reflections.

Ramuz's language bears traces of the hold that Péguy must have exercised over him. It offers the same cascade of repetitions, the same series of minimal variations on a given phrase. But what in Péguy recalls the movement of a man driving in a nail by successive hammer strokes, rather suggests, with Ramuz, the gait of an individual interminably repeating his steps—like those neurotics who, when they leave the house, are obsessed by the idea of having left a tap running or forgotten to turn off the gas. A recent critic has rightly emphasized the tenacious anxiety of Ramuz. In other words, one will not be expecting certainty, trenchancy or established conviction from this author. The drawbacks of such an approach are obvious; but it is not without certain advantages. Ramuz is a relatively unbiased spirit. He proved this five years ago with his book *What is Man*, an interesting attempt to get to the heart of the famous Russian experience, which displays the same hesitations that are so striking in 'Pages from a Neutral' and in *Paris: Notes by a Vaudois*.

As to the latter: the first chapters, which tell how the 'little Vaudois' established himself in Paris around the beginning of the century, may be simply signalled in passing. Ramuz describes with great acuity the developing consciousness of the young provincial whose Parisian isolation makes him aware of his essential solitude and difference. Moving on to the theoretical notes in the second part of the book, a few samplings will suffice to bring out the characteristics noted above. Ramuz writes:

To me it seems false . . . to condemn the civilization of the great cities in the name of nature, or the other way round, since both of them exist, both are givens, both are a necessity . . . Far from preaching a 'return to the land', as so many do, I think it is the city (whether one deplores it or not) that will end up invading the countryside for good; by which I mean the ways of the city, the machine and the ways of the machine, for the city was the first to industrialize, but industry only represents man's grip upon the forces of nature, and there is no reason why this control should not gradually be extended to the entire universe (pp. 126–7).

This is in sharp distinction to the denunciations of the great city as a centre of disorder and disruption, sheltering that 'nomadic, floating and overflowing mass . . . corrupting by its idleness in the public arena, blown by the winds of factions, by the voice of whoever shouts loudest.' This was Lamartine, but the same alarm bells ring all through the century—in Haussmann, and later Spengler. It is no less surprising

---

<sup>1</sup> C. F. Ramuz (1878–1947): Swiss writer. [Footnotes by NLR]

to encounter Ramuz's account of the alleged eclipse of the prestige of Paris—the great city *par excellence*:

Paris, they assure us, is in the process of being surpassed. And I do not know whether these pessimists are right, but even if this is the case, and especially if it is, I for my part would only rejoice. For international Paris is perhaps only accessory, and perhaps it is precisely due to its international situation that Paris has forgotten that it was first of all the capital of a nation (p. 185). Paris has rather too much neglected to bear in mind that it was above all the first parish of France (p. 181).

You will understand, from this little internal debate, how greatly Ramuz seems designed by vocation for the role of Neutral. At all events, his gifts as observer and writer bring us some remarkable pages:

Paris no longer appears to us as simply a product of civilization, but also as the producer of an anti-civilization, in which man is debased below himself; for Paris has its tramps, it has its primitives, its stone-age men who for years have had no identity papers, who no longer even have names, who can neither read or write. The police pick them up on a raid, but get nothing from them and let them go. The police arrest them a second time, but what can be done with those who have definitively exited society? How else can they live unless as vagabonds? So the police let them go, and we see them roaming even on the boulevards, but completely alien to the surrounding crowd (pp. 131–2).

The reader can expand on such reflections in painful reverie: this wandering flock that Ramuz evokes has been enlarged by the war that has raged in Guernica, in Vyborg, in Warsaw.

Michel Leiris's book, *Manhood*, is also based on the biography of the author.<sup>2</sup> But what a different biography this is! Before going further, I would like to draw out what it has in common with other recent Surrealist publications. Particularly notable is a decline in the power of bluff: a power that was one of the glories of Surrealist actions from the beginning. This drop is accompanied by a weakening of internal structure and an unwonted textual transparency. This is due, in part, to the grip that Freudianism exerts over these authors.

Leiris is in his mid-thirties. He was a member of the Collège de Sociologie, which I wrote to you about at the time of its foundation. In civilian life

---

<sup>2</sup> Michel Leiris (1910–90): ethnographer, Surrealist.

he is an ethnologist with the Musée de l'Homme, at the Trocadéro. As for the personal impression he makes, you met him yourself in 1934 or 35, at a soirée at Landsberg's.<sup>3</sup> It would be no exaggeration to claim that his book would have been the greatest success of the literary season if the War had not intervened. I think certain pages of his autobiography might interest you and will take the liberty of sending you the volume.

You will not suspect me of an excessive tenderness, either for the milieu from which this production emerges, or for the literary genre ('true confessions') to which it belongs. In fact the book rather reminded me of Chaplin's well-known gag where, playing the part of a pawnshop employee dealing with a customer who wants to pawn an alarm clock, he examines the object with distrust, then, to make sure, carefully takes the mechanism to pieces, finally putting all the parts in the customer's hat and explaining that he cannot see his way to granting a loan on such an object. I have been told that, when Polgar saw this film, he exclaimed: 'That's psychoanalysis, the spitting image!'<sup>4</sup> Leiris's book, which the author explains was written after psychoanalytic treatment, may well trigger the same remark. It seems unlikely that a man who has been brought to list his mental assets so scrupulously can hope to produce future works. Leiris explains this clearly enough: 'It is as though the fallacious constructions on which my life was based had been undermined at their foundations, without my being given anything that could replace them. The result is that I certainly act more sagaciously; but the emptiness in which I dwell is all the more acute' (p. 167).

It is not surprising, after this, that the author should show little gratitude towards psychoanalysis: 'Though the modern explorers of the unconscious speak of Oedipus, castration, guilt, narcissism, I do not believe this is any great advance in terms of the essentials of the matter (which remains, as I see it, related to the problem of death, the apprehension of nothingness, and is thus a question for metaphysics)' (p.125). This passage delimits the intellectual horizon of Leiris and his milieu. His judgement of the revolutionary impulses that he experienced at one point is thus only to be expected: 'I could not completely admit at that time that what triggered my anger . . . was not the condition that the laws of society have placed us in, but simply death' (p. 553).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ludwig Landsberg (1901–44): German philosopher.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Polgar (1873–1955): Austrian essayist; the remark also appears in Polgar, *Ja und Nein*, Hamburg 1956.

These positions, though they situate the book, would not in themselves have led me to bring it to your attention. The reason is rather that, for all our reservations, it must be admitted that the complexes recorded here are described with a remarkable vigour. If you will excuse a personal reference, I would say that the two dominant complexes, Lucretia and Judith, forcefully remind me of those colour plates that are to be found in certain books of the mid-nineteenth century. These were novels for *petites gens*, shop assistants or servants, and the illustrations were the work of anonymous artists. Plates with garish colours were covered with a coat of varnish that gave them an ambiguous glow. These illustrations (to which I consecrated my collector's passion for many years) belong to what can be called the folklore of the great cities. In Leiris's work this same folklore flows from places such as public swimming pools, brothels and racecourses. It is inspired by an eroticism that rejects socially acceptable forms and turns resolutely towards exoticism and crime. The author's depictions of the fortune-telling prostitute (p. 33), of Judith (p. 116), of the museum as a site of debauchery (p. 40) are gripping. I was not surprised to find, in two interlinked sentences, the same interweaving of purity and corruption that gives this popular imagery I mentioned above its terrifying charm. Leiris actually writes: 'I have always loved purity, folklore, all that is childish, primitive, innocent.'—And, immediately after: 'I aspire to evil because a certain evil is necessary to entertain me' (p. 110). Finally, I would like to signal to you two passages of philosophical interest: a theory of orgasm (pp. 65–6), and an erotic theory of suicide (p. 114).

Leiris's book shows how little the Surrealists are beholden to workaday Freudian orthodoxy. It goes without saying that it is the positivist rudiments of the doctrine that trigger their protests; but since any serious critical effort is foreign to them, they end up reintroducing metaphysical concepts into Freudian doctrine. This brings them closer to Jung. It is Jung to whom Bachelard appeals in his most recent book, devoted to the forefather of Surrealism, Lautréamont.<sup>5</sup> This book is instructive for many reasons. Before outlining the three main aspects, I will conjure up the figure of the psychoanalytic sniper, as embodied in Adrien Turel. I do not know if you are familiar with the famous explanation of the *Divine Comedy*, or more specifically of the *Inferno*, whose nine circles, according to Turel, represent the nine months that the embryo spends

---

<sup>5</sup> Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962): *Lautréamont*, Paris 1939.

in the mother's womb.<sup>6</sup> That will give you a basic idea of the atmosphere of Bachelard's studies. For all that, the argument from which the book begins is solidly established.

Bachelard points to the preponderant role played by animals in Lautréamont's imagination. He draws up an inventory of the animal forms that proliferate in *Maldoror*. It is not, however, the bodily shape of these beasts that obsesses the poet, but rather their aggressive desire. Here again, Bachelard's exposition seems unassailable. He explains how disturbed Lautréamont is by various forms of animal aggressivity. He shows how these different manifestations are constantly transforming into each other. They present the elements of an interminable metamorphosis. This must be emphasized, in Bachelard's view, while taking into account the primacy of claw and muzzle as symbols of aggression. Among the living creatures of the earth, the ones that Lautréamont particularly identifies with, according to Bachelard, are those that swim and those that fly. (In fact the attempt is made to establish a kind of mystic identity between the two.)

It goes without saying that no elucidation of Lautréamont's poetry can succeed outside of a historical analysis. Bachelard's accommodation of a metaphysical concept of 'spirit' stands in total opposition to this. It is this concept—through which he reunites with Jung—that deprives him of any critical penetration, and which is finally responsible for a terminology both slovenly and pedantic. References to an 'essentially dynamic phenomenology' (p. 42), a 'psychism that is not only kinetic, but truly potential' (p. 174), sustained by a grandiloquent jargon—'the animal is a monovalent psychism' (p. 173), etc.—stud the text. Theorists such as Caillois, or 'the eager young philosopher Armand Petit-jean' (pp. 180 and 187) are appealed to as authorities. Nor is Klossowski's study on *Time and Aggression* forgotten. The book's methodological procedure, in other words, is far from promising. But before tackling the heart of his study, I would like to mention what is truly amusing about it—comic, even. And I am far from claiming that this comic aspect was not felt and intended by the author himself.

For Bachelard, Lautréamont's death at the age of twenty-four—as well as certain passages in his oeuvre—justifies placing great importance on

---

<sup>6</sup> Adrien Turel (1890–1957): Swiss philosopher and psychoanalyst; see 'Dantes "Inferno" als Gegenwart und Wirklichkeit' in *Die Literarische Welt* 3, 1927.

the experience of the poet as a schoolboy. The pages where he brings out the deep-seated nature of the poet's cruelty—identified both with the severity of the teachers, and with the tortures inflicted by the older boys on those new to the class—are very welcome. Nor is Bachelard afraid to write that Lautréamont's drama is one 'born in the Rhetoric class' (p. 99). In a conclusion, he connects Lautréamont's famous 'Hymn to Mathematics' (model for Aragon's 'Hymn to Philately') to the very essence of this cruelty:

*Severity is a psychosis;* in particular, it is the professional psychosis of the teacher. It is more serious in the case of the mathematics teacher than any other, for in mathematics severity is coherent; its necessity can be demonstrated; it is the psychological face of a theorem (p. 126).

I confess that I find highly seductive the idea that this book, full of outrageous assertions, emerged from a classroom, like Athena from the head of Zeus. It is also backed up by quotations that show what a raging need for revenge his school years aroused in the poet: 'The classroom is hell, and hell is a classroom' (p. 101).

The third aspect that Bachelard's book offers is far and away the most interesting; it is also one that has completely escaped the author himself. To stay within the circle of psychoanalytic experience, his book might be compared with drawings that certain analysands provide to help explain their dreams. Psychoanalysts treat the drawings as puzzles (*Vexierbilder*) and manage to find in them images that correspond to the subject's latent preoccupations. Bachelard's book likewise has a latent content, of which he allows himself to be the dreamer, I would say.

Lautréamont's fundamental impulse, as Bachelard describes it—his 'Platonic violence' (p. 168)—suggests all-too-familiar features to the contemporary reader. But Bachelard is so unaware of the image these features compose that he is quite prepared to salute this new 'Platonism' as a philosophy of the future. His description of Maldoror's aggression can be summarized in four tropes. 'It is in the *dream of action* that the truly human joys of action reside. To act without acting, to leave . . . the heavy continuous time of practice for the shimmering momentary time of projects' (p. 197)—here is the first distinctive feature of his conception. From this it follows that violence demands a 'suspended time', to which Lautréamont 'knew how to give the temporal essence of *menace*,

of deferred aggression.' 'Whilst animal aggression is expressed without delay, and is candid in its crime . . . Lautréamont integrates the *lie* into his violence. The lie is the human sign *par excellence*' (p. 90). Here we encounter the third element of this unprecedented Platonism:

At the level of this violence, we always discover a gratuitous beginning, a pure beginning, an instant of aggression, a Ducassian instant. Aggression is *unforeseeable*, for the attacker as well as the attacked: this is one of the clearest lessons to be drawn from the study of Lautréamont (p. 184).

Finally, in the same order of ideas, this violence is essentially vindictive. 'What is striking in . . . Lautréamont's revenges is that these are almost never struggles against *an equal*. They attack the weakest or the strongest . . . they smother or they scratch. They smother the weak. They scratch the strong' (p. 80).

Bringing together these indications—scattered throughout Bachelard's analysis—the physiognomy of Hitlerite domination emerges with all the sharpness one could wish, like the figure hidden in the puzzle. Thus it should not be too much of an effort for Bachelard to grasp the insanity of his assertion that 'It is necessary to graft intellectual values onto Lautréamontism' (p. 199).

Reading these reflections, you will surely not accuse me of forcing the interpretation or seeing problems where there are none. And yet, to better explain the course that my thoughts have followed in such readings, I would like to interject a few words on a subject that has nothing directly to do with the present survey. I refer to Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Without dwelling on the circumstances that led me to consult this book, I simply want to let you know the devastating impression it makes on anyone who opens it for the first time in these months. I have had the opportunity to do so, as well as that of finding not the German text but only the French translation, which, by sacrificing its nuances, shows all the more sharply the book's key ideas. You are familiar with the work; I shall not repeat them here. The most I will say is that I found in Spengler a development of the idea of peace that is a perfect complement to Bachelard's analysis of violence: 'Universal peace is always a unilateral decision. The *Pax Romana* had one and only one meaning for the later military emperors and the German kings: to make a formless

population of hundreds of millions into the object of the will to power of a few small bands of warriors' (p. 266).

I do not flatter myself with making any new discovery when I say that a number of elements of the Hitlerite doctrine are ready to hand in this book. For example: 'It is from an entirely metaphysical disharmony of "feeling" that a racial hatred is born which is no less strong between French and Germans than between Germans and Jews' (p. 235). All this is too well known; the only thing that could perhaps detain us is that, when this second volume appeared in 1922, any decisive reaction on the part of the German Left seems to have been absent. The intellectuals, as always, were the first to acclaim the builder of their own scaffold.

Apart from all this, there is one element of the book whose meaning seems only to have surfaced at the present time. This concerns the very procedure of Spengler's thought, which seems to prefigure that of Hitlerite strategy. Spengler, without any deep knowledge of the subjects on which he prognosticates, refers to the most distant epochs with the sole purpose of integrating them into a performance—*Schau*—which constitutes, quite precisely, a speculative model for the *Reich*. This *Schau* is, in fact, expressly defined as a 'decree of blood' (p. 69). Any historical epoch can form part of its metaphysical 'living space', just as any territory can form part of the *Reich*'s *Lebensraum*. The démarche in the physical world was thus preceded by a similar metaphysical procedure. Few books give a better sense of what is hideous and hateful in the claim of German profundity.

The poverty of the German intellectual milieux mentioned above is not without its counterpart in France. At the moment when the Hitler–Stalin *entente* has knocked away the whole scaffolding of the Popular Front, a book has appeared that provides evidence of the latter's intrinsic weaknesses. To be sure, one does not approach Eugène Dabit's *Intimate Diary* in any spirit of severity.<sup>7</sup> The author tells his story without pretensions of any kind—neither literary: 'I speak here only of certain of my states of mind. And not always very clearly or deeply' (p. 342)—nor moral: no search for a position of advantage, or even an interesting attitude. There is, besides, the question of his fate: the author was cut down, not yet forty, by an illness contracted during his journey to Russia. All this makes for

---

<sup>7</sup> Eugène Dabit (1898–1936): author of *Hôtel du Nord*.

a rather favourable disposition towards the book he left behind; but this inevitably evaporates in the course of reading. It is oppressive, and for reasons that, for the most part, necessarily escaped its author.

One cannot discount the fact that Dabit was a champion of the Popular Front, and one in whom the literary hopes of the movement were vested. Yet the first striking fact is the lacklustre colouring of his political memoirs. Interviews with men like Gide or Malraux; descriptions of meetings, such as the French writers' protest in support of those persecuted in Germany; allusions to the various cultural congresses—all lack precision, and above all any vibrant communicative power. As for the European upheavals that took place during the eight years that his *Diary* covers (1928–36), their repercussion here is almost nonexistent. The advent of Hitler, the Abyssinian war, the beginnings of the civil war in Spain, serve simply as backdrop to the stage occupied by the author's states of mind.

There is something typical in all this. The latest book by Guéhenno (*Diary of a 'Revolution'*) is further proof: a commentary on the Popular Front government, and far more resolutely oriented to political actuality, it is no less vague and adopts no decisive stance. André Thérive, the best-informed of French critics, judiciously wrote (*Le Temps*, 22 June 1939): 'M. Guéhenno sustains his confidence by his very defeats.' In Dabit's case, it is less a matter of confidence than of apprehension, derived from a tenacious fear of 'missing out on life'. It is true that he confesses this fear without any affectation. But could a more sophisticated presentation lend worth to such reflections as these?

It is life that I want to grasp, yet despite my attempts, all I retain is fragments. The fault is not entirely mine. Life erects too many barriers, in front of us and between us. Men and women are separated by them, by customs, conventions, etc. And then so many traps lie before us: a baby, diseases that are comically called 'venereal' . . . Too many obstacles! And life slips between your fingers (p. 296).

Complaints of this kind set the tone. Obsession with women recurs repeatedly, plaintive for the most part. Yet this is a man of thirty-seven. Most disconcerting of all is the insistence on the agony of war, which crops up like an *idée fixe*, no matter what the context. This obsession seems to have the function of draining any definite content from the political circumstances that fuel it. There is something sad in discovering that a man

whom one had imagined sturdy and determined to change the course of events, in reality latches on to the first philanthropist to come along.

Closing this long parenthesis, let us return to Surrealism with the last-but-one book by Jules Romains, Volume 17 of his *Men of Good Will: Vorge against Quinette*. Its subject is quite curious. In the second volume of his story, Romains had introduced Landru as one of his characters (under the name of Quinette).<sup>8</sup> In Volume 17, he brings Quinette to the fore, while dissociating him quite unexpectedly from his original model. Quinette, in fact, is supposed to follow the Landru trial in the papers, and to find one of his own victims in the list of crimes imputed to Landru. It is around this time that a young Surrealist, Vorge, comes across Quinette, whom he alone sees in his true light, i.e. as the author of a series of murders, through a series of links that Romains cleverly constructs. It is only a short step from this to promote Quinette as the grand master of Surrealism, which Vorge cheerfully does.

The novel is a pleasant read. If I mention it here in particular it is because it provides grounds for thinking more about its author. (Another reason, of which I assume you are aware, is that Romains has been very active in support of the intellectuals in the detention camps. He was intervening on my behalf when I was released.) Two questions may be asked about Romains: why does he have such a great influence on the public? And what is his political 'line of force'? The two questions are connected. As for the second, I would refer to my letter of 24 January last year. Here it is appropriate to signal the broad political developments in the volume under discussion, which appeared towards the end of last year, in other words just after the declaration of war. This confers a very particular interest on its final chapter 'The Festival of Victory'. It makes a gripping read. One of the principal passages loses scarcely anything in being taken out of context:

There has been . . . a great change. Men have waged many wars, have often known victory, often defeat. But never, before celebrating victory, have they been so harassed by the thought of the dead. Yet this time it is a very great victory; the greatest, in one sense, that there ever has been. Yes, but perhaps this is because there have never been so many deaths. In this mathematics of human madness, there must be limits that it is unwise to cross. The

---

<sup>8</sup> Henri Landru (1869–1922): conman convicted of 11 murders in 1919, the year in which the action of *Vorge against Quinette* unfolds.

proportions are out of joint. The weight of the dead grows faster than the pride of the victors. The pile of corpses rises quicker than the trophies. However great the victory, it will not succeed in catching up with the dead.

One might say this is simply reportage. But it is reportage impregnated not just with the atmosphere of past events, but also with the actual situations of the many readers of this account. This leads me to the first of the two questions. One of Romains's achievements lies in the fact that his work, starting from the post-War era, is entirely devoted to a recent past, yet combines this portrayal of the past with a constant concern for actuality. This makes his work full of passages that, like double exposures, project information of immediate interest onto a background of the recent past. Romains's speciality within contemporary French literature is the richness of information on the play of the social machine, the routines of government, church, parliamentary, commercial and military action. On this point his books are comparable to the novels of Dumas *père*, with their inexhaustible detailing of Parisian life. At all events, Romains possesses an extraordinary faculty for putting a range of psychological and social experiences within public reach that it would be hard to access through reasoning or moral feeling. The way in which Surrealism is presented in *Vorge against Quinette* is further proof of this.

I have waited until the end of this survey to discuss a rather slim volume presented as a series of essays—Georges Salles, *Le Regard*. This is an enchanting work. I bring it to your attention not so much for some of the theoretical passages, which I shall note, but rather for its beauty, which strike the reader more or less throughout in its happy formulations. Salles is curator of Oriental Antiquities at the Louvre, and writes only incidentally. His book is all the richer from the experiences accumulated in the course of his work. Nothing reveals this better than when the author laments:

the unique prestige that the darkened canvases of the old masters exert on the general public. The favour bestowed on them is a curious index of the disdain in which most people hold their sensory impressions . . . The sombre veil covering the famous image reassures them, since what they seek is not a happy vision, but an embalmed glory (p. 23).

In defining such a vision, the author uses terms close to Proust's. I was particularly struck to find a description of the aura similar to the one I used in my *Baudelaire*. Salles sees art objects as

witnesses of the age that rediscovered them, of the scholar that studied them, of the prince that acquired them and of the connoisseurs that constantly reclassify them. On any one object, the rays of countless gazes, near or far, interconnect and lend it their life (pp. 69–70).

Salles considers the connoisseur's contribution as essential to the life of museums. He fears the day when the state becomes the sole collector. In the meantime, he ascribes to the museum the task of educating the public's sensibility, over and above that of instruction.

The author rails against a misplaced modernization, and expresses reservations about some of the initiatives at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, with particular allusion to the Van Gogh exhibition where the canvases were surrounded with documentation, as much photographic as written. The public was overwhelmed with far more material than it could take in. (One of the principal contributors to this exhibition was John Rewald. Along with the novelist Noth, he is almost the only German émigré to have made a name for himself in France. He is a hard worker, very well-informed on certain subjects, a young man in command of his world—yet a mind without real scope.) Salles's critique of this false scientific complacency is also an attack on excessive material comfort. He denounces the danger 'of pandering too much to the ease of the visitor or the comfort of the art-object', and thus neglecting '*the timely inconvenience* that provokes their encounter and initiates debate' (pp. 90–1).

Salles's concern for clarity, and for the riches of sensuous reception, are combined with a perfect understanding of the workings of theory. He understands its necessarily indirect and roundabout character, and grasps its aim. 'An art', in effect, 'differs from what has gone before, and comes into being precisely because it expresses a completely different reality, not merely a material modification: it reflects a different man . . . The moment to grasp is that at which an expressive fullness responds to the birth of a social character' (pp. 118–20). Salles seems to understand very clearly what the theoretical penetration of the art object, provided this is sufficiently far-reaching, can teach us about 'the birth of a social character'. 'To study the fundamentals of an art, we must, in the end, shatter our frameworks and steep ourselves in those hallucinations of which this art yields us only a clotted sediment; we must journey through the depths of social species now extinct. A hazardous task, with much to tempt a sociologist aware of his mission' (pp. 123–4).

There is no need to force the text to see that in these lines the author pursues an identical goal to that envisaged in the third part of my essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility'. I hope these few notes will suffice to persuade you to read this book, which has such an essentially Parisian atmosphere: the gentle and powerful light of knowledge, filtered through the unstable, cloudy layer of the passions.

In my letter of 3 November 1937, I informed you about *Merinos* by Henri Calet. I can now recommend *Fever of the Polders*, by the same author, published after an interval of three years. The quite remarkable quality of this novel explains why Calet cannot conform to the normal rhythm of production for novelists, of one or two books per year.

As a matter of conscience I will note a novel by Victor Serge, *Midnight in the Century*. The author is of the same party as Souvarine—as you no doubt know. His book has no literary value, and holds the attention only for its picturesque descriptions of Stalinist terror. It is far below the triptych of the Soviet regime that Panait Istrati painted ten years ago.<sup>9</sup>

Caillois has published a 'Theory of the Festival' in the NRF, rather pretentious reflections that contain nothing really new. The same author—he is now in Argentina, where he has just got married—has launched a manifesto there against Hitlerism. It is a series of points that simply repeats what honest people have been saying unceasingly for seven years.

By way of information: a *History of Art Criticism* by Lionello Venturi. The author, son of the famous historian of Italian Renaissance painting, left for America at the start of the War. His book is only a compilation, complete but hurried. A young *normalien*, Georges Blin, has just published a book on Baudelaire (with NRF). I shall tell you about it next time.

A few days ago, I heard from Mme Adorno that M. Kraft wrote to you from Jerusalem to claim priority for 'Jochmann'. She said that you would be forwarding me his letter. This has still not reached me. But in any case I want to tell you right away that M. Kraft's letter relates to a conflict following which I broke off relations with him. This was early in 1937,

---

<sup>9</sup> Panait Istrati (1884–1935): Romanian novelist, collaborator of Serge and Boris Souvarine. Istrati in fact only wrote the first volume of the 1929 trilogy to which Benjamin refers—*Towards the Other Flame*; Serge wrote the second, Souvarine the third, but by agreement all three appeared under Istrati's name.

and my 'Jochmann' text was at the root of it. M. Kraft was familiar with Jochmann before I was; but I came across him *independently* from Kraft, in the course of my studies at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Seeing M. Kraft issue the claim to reserve this author for himself, I did not hide the fact that I deemed this inadmissible, and will consider it totally unacceptable. I await his letter to send you a detailed exposé of the facts.

Death has reaped an ample harvest in recent times, even in 'peaceful' quarters. You will naturally have been informed of the deaths of Fuchs and Bouglé. The great critic Charles Du Bos shortly preceded them. A few days ago, Paul Desjardins died; I described him to you last year during my visit to Pontigny. And personally, I have just lost a very young friend, a graphic artist of exquisite talent, who took his own life together with his wife.<sup>10</sup>

One of these days I shall tackle the rest of *Baudelaire*.

Since neither my health nor the blackout makes me want to go out, I live a very reclusive existence. Perhaps that can excuse the unwarranted length of this letter.

I end with my most cordial greetings to you and your friends.

Walter Benjamin

<sup>10</sup> Eduard Fuchs (1870–1940): collector; Célestin Bouglé (1870–1940): sociologist; Charles Du Bos (1882–1939): literary critic; Paul Desjardins (1859–1940): organizer of the annual gatherings of writers and intellectuals at the Décades de Pontigny, 1910–39. The graphic artist and his wife are probably Augustus Hamburger and Carola Muschler.

Translated by David Fernbach

Reprinted from Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vi, pp. 403–21, with permission of Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.